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# Portland Park Signage: An Exploration Into Reimagining Placemaking

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Portland Park Signage: An Exploration Into Reimagining Placemaking

by

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I outline the rebrand for Portland Park Signage discussing the role between signage and visitor experience. I researched the fundamentals of user experience in physical space in the hope of beginning to understand how people connect with and interpret space into meaning. In doing so I discovered that providing visitors with a variety of experiences was key to developing positive experiences in public space which I attempted to interpret into the design of the sign itself. I did so by providing viewers with a variety of ways to interact with the sign as well as a variety in the depth of information. This allows users to choose their own experience when interacting with the signs that I designed. These signs also serve to reimagine how we define our relationship within space, recognizing the nuances between people and the spaces they interact with.

## **Introduction**

The relationship between people and space is a complicated one especially when talking about public space. However, it is this relationship that I wanted to study. I examined how people connect with space as well as key indicators in defining those relationships. My goal was to understand and begin to redefine the relationship between people and space through signage.

Instead of answering a question, the goal of this project was to ask one. If we all experience space in a variety of ways, what I wanted to know is, how do we as individuals choose to define our experience within public spaces? Currently, within the design world we use the word 'user' to define this interaction. I would like to propose the argument that this assessment is too reductive and suggests a hierarchy between people and place. Instead I would like to offer that we transition to more nuanced language that represents the true meaning of the relationships and interactions we have. The term 'visitor experience' is what I arrived at in relation to the scope of this project. This led me to my final question that my project aims to

answer. How do we depart from the mindset of being a user and enter that of a visitor within public space?

It is important for us as individuals, but also as a collective, to reflect on our use and management of spaces, especially ones meant for everyone. In doing so, we also reflect on what narratives and people are missing or excluded from seemingly public space and for what reasons. While space may seem public it can actively exclude people and narratives to support specific ideologies.

I wanted to understand and reimagine how we use and think about public space, redesigning Portland Public Park signage. My primary goal is to design signs that help visitors develop a more symbiotic relationship with the space by giving them the opportunity to engage and learn about the space in ways that may be less evident than if they were to walk through it. I developed two signs;

- 1) the first is the welcoming signage that is often seen when entering the parks,
- 2) and the second being a sign that presents visitors with the opportunity to engage in further insight into the space.

The purpose of the second sign, which I will call the placemaking sign, acts as a way for visitors to connect with the space in a more symbiotic way. This suggests that visitors move from being in a mindset of use to that of a visitor, with understanding at the forefront of their experience. Secondary to this is the primary sign, which I will call the welcoming sign, that works to enforce the message in the secondary sign by unifying the visual language throughout the parks.

## **Research**

### *Successful Space and Choice*

Successful public space is that which allows users a variety of choice and customization instead of limiting their experience to dos and don'ts. In their book, *The Social Life of Small Urban*

*Spaces*, William H. Whyte explores the shortcomings and successes of New York City plazas. While Whyte's book is mainly focused on the plaza, he discovers many overarching findings that can also be applied to parks.

"Make It Your Own: Improvisation In Public Space" reinforces the finding that successful public space allows for customization discussing the importance of allowing people to adjust the space so that they can develop unique experiences. Allowing visitors the opportunity to make a wide variety of choices helps them connect with it and thus makes them want to develop the habit of returning to the space ("Make It Your Own: Improvisation In Public Space," 2020).

Allowing visitors to adjust the space in accordance with their needs as well as leaving room for informal activities are two ways to do this (Whyte, 1990). To address the first concept of adjustment, within *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* there is a section discussing an experiment done in which loose chairs were placed throughout a plaza. What was found was that while people often did not move the chairs more than a couple of inches most of the time, they enjoyed the option of being able to move their seat as to customize the space (Whyte, 1990).

Giving room for informal activities also drastically improves placemaking (a visitor's desire to be connected to a space and feel comfortable within it) ("Make It Your Own: Improvisation In Public Space," 2020). One example of this would be the chess boards in the Park Blocks in Portland, which invite users to bring chess pieces and play in the park. Large grassy areas often do this as well by allowing a variety of different activities such as soccer and having lunch ("Make It Your Own: Improvisation In Public Space," 2020).

Successful public parks allow people to connect and experience space on their own terms and not in a formalized or edited manner which promotes a sense of ownership and connection within the space.

*Spaces Communicate, We Have to Listen*

We often experience architecture in a state of distraction. What this means is that we often do not listen to how space is communicating and influencing our behavior. In many ways responding to space has become second nature. We understand how space communicates to us through our past experiences and respond accordingly (Grange, 1999). For example, paths tell us where we should and shouldn't walk and benches indicate where we should take a rest. However, some paths are not accessible to some people due to mobility impairments and some seats indicate certain types of rest that force users into uncomfortable forms of rest. Sometimes these things are done to protect the natural spaces, but other times it is done to exclude and include certain types of people. What this points to is that space often speaks through a dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion. To hear only inclusion is to be someone who the space is designed for. On the other hand to hear exclusion is to understand that public space is not meant for the public.

"Desire lines and defensive architecture in modern urban environments" looks at how public spaces exclude and how this forces people into adapting and forming their own ways of surviving within spaces. The authors state that private interests are taking over seemingly public space and as such, these spaces filter out unwanted visitors (Smith, 2018). As private interests take over public spaces begin to cater to specific affluent groups while excluding "undesirable" groups (Whyte, 1990).

When observing space it is crucial to recognize your own privilege but also what these subliminal messages reflect on the entirety of the public space and those who created them. While it may be seemingly easy for some to traverse and exist in space, it is often the opposite for those who the space was not designed for. To understand this is to understand how the world is designed for specific types of people and excludes those it is not meant for. Understanding how public space includes and excludes is crucial towards understanding who exactly the audience for this project is.

### *Visitor Experience, Not User Experience*

The Portland Parks system (PPS) is an experience driven model. What this means is that the PPS aims to provide visitors with a wide variety of experiences throughout all their parks. The other design that parks follow is the cookie cutter model in which all parks consist of similar facilities. To understand what experiences visitors are looking for the Portland Parks Service breaks visitor experience into five different steps;

- Anticipate
- Perceive
- Interpret
- Evaluate
- Recall (Donaldson, 2009).

“People judge the effectiveness and quality of services primarily through their own personal experiences and base their support on them. So it is essential to understand people’s experiences with the recreation places they value and to incorporate this knowledge into plans and management goals” (Donaldson, 2001). Understanding a visitor’s experience within a park and why they go to them can help further clarify what role the parks play in the lives of the community.

### *Structure Serves Community*

Within this experience driven model the Portland Parks Service places their parks into three different categories:

- Nature (conservation spaces),
- Nature People (spaces that are meant to connect people with nature),
- And People (social spaces) (Donaldson, 2009).

While many of Portland’s parks could fit into multiple sections of these categories, their primary function in how they serve the community often fits into one of the following categories.

For example, Washington Park provides users with a variety of options from tennis courts to the Japanese tea gardens. However, by looking at the larger design and through accumulating the functions one can determine that it would best fit into the Nature/People category of the Portland Park system.

### *Inconsistencies with Existing Signage*

I observed a series of issues relating to the introduction of signage to the Portland Parks.

- 1) The first issue is the distance of the signs from the path which makes the signs difficult to read. For example the Couch Park sign was about 10 feet away from the trail and was shrouded by the surrounding leaves and bushes. To capture an image of the sign I had to walk off the trail to be able to see it clearly. This was an issue with several signs within not only Couch Park but Washington Park, as well. In fact, I found that many of the signs that involved a lot of text were often placed further from the trail than signs that included simple icons and less text.
- 2) The second issue was inconsistency in the signage. Signs that carry the same information often have different design treatments and signs with different information have the same treatment. In Jamison Square park I observed a sign telling you the name of the park whereas in Washington Park I observed a sign with a similar image treatment serving as a form of wayfinding. This makes finding signs that carry specific information difficult.
- 3) Finally, almost all parks lacked any clear signage that discussed the history or intentionality of the space as a whole. The only park in my research that had signs that described the history of the space was Tanner Springs Park.

## **Project**



I developed a signage system and style guidelines for Portland public Parks. This system reflects the type styling, spacing, content, and sizing of the signage system. The aim of these guidelines is to allow these signs to be made by others over a period of time as constructing all of them at once would be an expensive endeavor. The signage system reflects two signs. The first sign is the placemaking sign and is the main sign I developed to achieve my goal of figuring out how to connect visitors with the space they are in, in a more symbiotic way. The second sign acts to reinforce the placemaking sign and is the welcoming sign. The goal of these two signs are to begin a nontraditional dialogue between people and space. The signs focus on things that exist beyond sight and make visitors think about the history of where they are. While not all of my research is directly correlated into the visual aspects of my sign it provided me with a framework and approach to develop signage that better represented the goals and structure of the Portland Park System.



Fig. 1: The final signage.

## Structure and Hierarchy



*Fig. 2:* The numbers indicate the order in which the sign is meant to be read in. The higher the number the more in depth the information is.

The main goal of the placemaking sign was to balance content and engagement. To meet that balance I organized the visual hierarchy so that the further you read through the sign the more in depth the information is, the most in depth information being the description and QR code. The QR code allows visitors to continue their engagement with the space and learn more about its natural features. I developed a sign that allows visitors to choose their own level of engagement by structuring the hierarchy around the depth of information. Providing visitors with some information on the sign while balancing it with the option to learn more, allows visitors to engage with the information on the sign in varying capacities. In other words, visitor can develop

their own experience with the sign connecting to the concept of placemaking in which visitors connect with space the more they are allowed to customize their own experience with it. By creating a more self-directed experience with the sign itself visitors will hopefully carry the information provided on the sign more actively when moving through the park. The placemaking sign contains a variety of content including;

- The name of the park,
- The portland parks logo,
- The native land it resides on,
- The year that the park was founded,
- A QR code that leads visitors to the official Portland Parks and Recreation website page for that park,
- An abbreviated description of the park from the website,
- And the hours of operation.

The content on the sign serves the goal of the sign by providing visitors with varying density of content.

The welcoming sign acts to reinforce the visual language in the placemaking sign developing a more consistent voice to the parks. The purpose of this sign is to unify the voice of the signage system and begin to develop a visual language for visitors to look out for. This addresses the issue of inconsistency in sign treatment that I found throughout my observational research. The welcoming signage contains;

- The park name,
- The hours of operation,
- And the Portland Parks and Recreation logo.

By including this information visitors can engage with the sign with a glance and gather the necessary information while also beginning to understand the visual language being developed.

## Type



Fig. 3: The type styling for different parts of the sign.

I chose the Halyard type family for this redesign. The typeface is a san serif with slightly quirky elements that suggest motion such as the tail on the capital “Q.” The typefaces slightly awkward stresses in the bolder weight also make it feel more personable and approachable. The typeface's large family allows for a variety of use and expansion into future signage updates as well.

## Color and Shape



*Fig. 4:* The two sign colors.

The signage is made up of two colors both of which are AAA color contrast certified. By meeting the AAA color contrast requirements I am attempting to also involve an audience that is often unconsidered or forgotten within what is seen as normal. Not all people have the same sight and by addressing this I hope that those who have felt excluded from engaging with signage feel a bit more included. The first color, Portland Green, is a slightly modified version of the green that the Portland Parks system currently uses. It has a little less blue and is slightly more vibrant making it feel more inviting. The secondary color is Rose White, named after the flowers that Portland is famous for, and helps the green stand out and makes the sign feel less stark.

The leaf shape placed behind some text is meant to feel friendly while inviting motion through the box. Whereas a square may feel strong and static, this shape promotes movement through the information. This shape became the hallmark of this rebrand and acts as its key visual identifier.

## **Conclusion**

Design as a medium of creating has the potential to redefine the relationship people have with the public spaces around them. While the design of the signage may not get all visitors to pay attention to their surroundings and experience space actively, I believe that it is a beginning to understanding space and place in more active ways. In doing so the signage becomes a transistor of space and understanding. I do not expect my project to solve the problems I observed and that were brought up in my research, the scope of that project is as wide as the variety of people that visit these parks, but I also think that they do begin to start a conversation around how we connect with space.

The goal of the signage was to move away from more traditional user experience rules and into allowing visitors to develop their own experiences within space that expand rather than limit visitors' experiences. In other words, while in digital landscapes limiting affordances may make the most amount of sense since the information that technology carries can be too expansive, being in physical spaces does not follow that rule.

When understanding the relationship between people and the interactions they have, it is also important to understand that expanding the ways in which people can interact with the world around them can actually work towards improving their overall experience. By limiting a visitor's experience into certain modes of understanding we as designers are not only detracting from their enjoyment but also erasing certain narratives that do not fit into our limiting experience. These signs suggest we as visitors reconsider our relationship with public spaces, but also we as a collective of designers reimagine our roles and influence in the world. Limiting experiences in public space no longer makes it public but instead a space with fictional narrative. This is not to say that people should be allowed to do whatever they want in public spaces but that when we educate people about truly public space we can begin to move towards a more expansive and inclusive future that both we and public space benefit from.

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